



# Getting Into a U.S. Graduate School

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI





MAHLON LOVETT/Princeton University



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*Left: People walk around the Princeton University campus in New Jersey as part of an Orange Key tour, the university's volunteer student tour guide service.*

*Above: The Brown University class of 2004 walks up College Hill from the First Baptist Church in America to the main green of the campus as part of graduation ceremonies in Providence, Rhode Island.*



**T**he United States is a favorite destination for Indians planning to pursue higher education abroad. There were almost 58,000 Indian graduate students in the United States in the 2004-05 academic year, says the nonprofit Institute of International Education. India overtook China in 2001-02 as the primary country of origin for most foreign students in the United States.

For Sadaf Humayun, an engineering graduate from Aligarh Muslim University, the United States represents an opportunity to pursue cutting-edge research. "There are limits to what we can do in India as far as research is concerned and the education system itself operates within certain constraints. But universities in the United States offer excellent research facilities, students have a lot of freedom to explore their skills and decide what they want to learn," says Humayun.

A graduate degree program in the United States is what we in India call postgraduate studies. Degrees awarded by graduate schools include master's degrees, doctorates and other postgraduate qualifications. The academic year usually lasts nine months, from August/September to May/June and may be divided into two, three or four terms, depending on the institution. If there are two, they are called fall and spring terms. "It is best to join in the fall term as scholarship opportunities are more readily available and it is a full-fledged session," says Luna Das, educational adviser for North India at the United States Educational Foundation in India (USEFI), the only official source designated by the U.S. government to give up-to-date, impartial and accurate information about higher education opportunities in America.

**For students aiming to join in the fall term in 2007, it is time to get moving.** "With more than 3,600 accredited institutions and tens of thousands of academic programs, Indian students get

an enormous choice for higher studies. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that there is always one perfect college for every individual," says Jamshed A. Siddiqui, deputy director of USEFI.

Manish Khanna, an engineering student at the Netaji Subhas Institute of Technology in New Delhi, says that what led him to plan higher studies in the United States is that "the curriculum is more flexible and accommodates the individual student's needs."

He also appreciates the "proper funding for research."

To draw up a list of institutions that meet *your* needs

check out their Web sites, write to the professors and admissions personnel for more details, visit USEFI, interact with students who have studied there or attend U.S. University Fairs in India. During the February-March 2006 visit to India by Linden Educational Services—which

helps U.S. universities recruit international students—students in Mumbai, Bangalore and New Delhi got to meet admissions officials from more than 24 institutions. If you have enough money, you can visit the campuses or take a summer course. Many schools organize campus tours led by current students. You should narrow down your university choices by August to be ready for the following year's fall term, because there is still more to do: applying, seeking financial aid, arranging for a visa, transportation and housing.

"Students should look beyond Ivy League colleges because there might be some lesser known but excellent school that offers exactly what you are looking for. Do not reject a university or college just because your family or friends have not heard of it before," advises Das. A department's reputation relies heavily on the quality of its faculty and sometimes it is more important to study under a particular person than at a university with a prestigious name. One should also check whether a degree from the school you are applying to will be recognized in India.

Suchi Sood, a final year student of physiotherapy at Delhi University who will apply for a master's program in the United States, says studying there means "a chance to learn much more because of its greater expertise in this field. Our options are limited here because it is not a well known subject in India," says Sood.

**All the necessary requirements** like the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) or Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) must be taken between May and October 2006 for the fall 2007 term. The TOEFL score is important for applicants from India, as for other international students.

*Richard Johnson, director, International Relations (Asia), University of San Francisco, talks with students at the Linden U.S. University Fair in New Delhi in February 2005.*

Readers interested in seeing the CD-Rom **"Inside Graduate Admissions,"** please send an e-mail to Vijaya Khandavilli at [vijaya@fulbright-india.org](mailto:vijaya@fulbright-india.org)



*Right: Musician Melissa Etheridge talks about her battle with cancer at a Biology of Cancer class at the University of California, Los Angeles.*

*Right, below: Emily Franks, a graduate student at the University of Findlay, draws house plans between classes in the Center for Fine and Performing Arts building on the campus of Owens Community College in Perrysburg, Ohio. She saves money by taking basic courses at the two-year school.*

Admissions committees also assess your proficiency in English through the GRE verbal score and your written statement of purpose. "Our students need to be able to think on their feet and to do that in English, which is the language of instruction," says Stuart J. Sigman, dean of the School of Communication at Emerson College, Massachusetts. If you have a list of schools ready by the time you take these tests you can ask that your scores be sent to them, saving time and money.

**After shortlisting the schools it is time to file your applications** between November 2006 and March 2007. Your packet should have the completed application form, academic credentials, test scores, the statement of purpose, letters of recommendation, application fee and, whenever necessary, supplemental materials like a portfolio of creative work or details about work experience. "Indian students must remember that admission to U.S. universities takes place on two levels—eligibility and admissibility. Besides test scores, they also take into account factors like published articles, research projects and the focus of your studies," says Vijaya Khandavilli, the USEFI country coordinator of Educational Advising Services. You can expect to hear from the universities in April, May or June 2007.

To be eligible to apply for a graduate program in the United States students must complete 16 years of school and college study. As India has three-year degree programs and students end up with 15 years of education, they have a number of options to get that extra year of study. They can do one year of postgraduate study, opt for a correspondence course with an institution like the Indira Gandhi National Open University or complete a one- or two-year postgraduate diploma program recognized by the Government of India. But that extra year needs to be carefully planned. As Evelyn Tate, director of graduate admissions and financial aid at the Boston University School of Management, says, "We would look more favorably upon a candidate who would have taken some of the more advanced courses as opposed to having taken more of the introductory level courses and sort of aced his or her way through." Schools also take into account whether the candidate has taken courses relevant to the program applied for.

**The statement of purpose** that American universities require applicants to write is your opportunity to show how the program you have applied for fits into your long-term goals. Sigman has some advice: "Write it yourself. We can actually tell if other people have written your essay. One of the reasons we can tell is your professional writer does not have the...interest in the program." Four questions should be answered in the essay: Why you want to pursue a graduate degree, what your academic or research interests are, why you have applied to this particular school and what special skills you can bring to the classroom. In other words, there should not be details about where you were born, what school you went to, what sports you participated in, as



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these are ignored by the selection committees. Most universities set a length and you should stick to that.

When seeking letters of recommendation, it helps to choose people who know you and your skills well. Your recommendation will be much stronger "if you choose the one professor you really had contact with and provide him with a reminder of the courses you had together and the special projects you worked on," says Susan Lee Albin, professor in the Department of Industrial Engineering at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

**A major issue for foreign students is funding.** Besides getting together your financial records like bank statements well ahead of time, it also helps if you don't send your application in bits and pieces as this delays the selection process and you run the risk of losing out on funding. "We have to make sure that we are following federal regulations and they require that we demonstrate that students have a full year of funding somewhere, whether it's funding from the school or from some other source," says Chris J. Foley, director of international admissions at Indiana University. Funding at U.S. graduate schools comes in the form of assistantships—research, teaching and administrative. "Students interested in research must select departments and universities that are research intensive and check out the profile of the faculty. For teaching assistantships, the department applied to should have an undergrad section. Otherwise, whom will you teach? As for administrative assistantships, IT and administrative skills are essential," says Khandavilli.

Once you get admission to the program of your choice, you should have your student visa in hand by August 2007. Then it is time to pack your bags and get set for the adventure that awaits in the United States. □